

Yellowleaf Farm

By Tilda Mims, Information Specialist, Alabama Forestry Commission

The Strongs used indigenous plants including beautyberry, oakleaf hydrangea, and brightly colored wildflowers to landscape around their home.

Yellowleaf Farm in Shelby County began simply as a weekend getaway for Mike and Cathy Strong's young family. They were struggling to achieve a balance between family and career but the balancing act was becoming more difficult.

They had enjoyed childhoods when family time often was spent relaxing and enjoying the outdoors. They recalled many summer days roaming the woods using only creativity to play games of action and adventure. As parents, they knew those family experiences were more than recreation. They were significant moments that taught and shaped their character as adults, and forged a powerful family bond. They wanted their sons, John Paul and McDonald, to have the same opportunity.

They bought the first piece of land along Yellowleaf Creek with this vision in mind when the boys were only four and six years old. Often bringing them here for an afternoon or a weekend of

outdoor fun, they also began involving the boys in management decisions by teaching them skills needed to work on the farm. Yellowleaf Farm worked its magic, quickly eclipsing all other recreation as their boys' favorite diversion into their college years.

Almost twenty years after the first purchase, the weekend retreat is a 553-acre TREASURE Forest. Mike and Cathy have lived on the farm for eight years and their sons returned to the Shelby County farm to live after college graduation a few years ago.

In 2003, Yellowleaf Farm was named the Helene Mosley Memorial TREASURE Forest Award winner for the 17-county northwest region.

Some of the family's many accomplishments are recorded in earlier issues of this magazine. The 2001 winter issue features a cover story on their restoration of more than ten historic log structures. A 2004 issue includes a few of their bridges in an article on affordable permanent stream crossings.

While these are significant and noticeable accomplishments, it is the day-to-day, year-round commitment to the farm that is the foundation of its success. The family works together daily to improve and maintain Yellowleaf Farm with primary emphasis on wildlife enhancement and secondary emphasis on timber pro-



Photos by Tilda Mims

duction to improve the health of the stand.

"When we bought this farm we didn't know a lot about wildlife or timber management," Mike said. "One of the best things we did was meet local Alabama Forestry Commission and Natural Resource Conservation Service folks. Through the help of many great people, going to seminars, and talking with other landowners, we learned."

The Strongs began with a wildlife strategy to promote and sustain an existing deer population while encouraging turkey, quail, and ducks. They emphasized native vegetation by fertilizing and disking natural honeysuckle and briar, and promoting natural vegetation cover on slash piles for additional food and shelter.

A five-year prescribed burning program yields multiple benefits for wildlife, timber, and aesthetics. It produced significant forage regeneration for whitetail deer and attracted the first turkey and quail population of the farm. Through experimentation, the Strongs learned that an alternating or patterned prescribed burn strategy needed cover for wildlife. Firelanes on all stands assist with prescribed burning and provide edge effect and additional cover for wildlife.

Supplemental wildlife food plots planted in Egyptian wheat, grain sorghum, sedum sorghum, partridge pea, and clover, and roadside plantings of chufa and peas set the table for all types of game and non-game species. Six portable deer feeders are moved frequently throughout the farm, using about 600 pounds of soybeans each week. Four miles of road within the farm is disked, limed, and seeded for wildlife.

The latest wildlife program on the property is a 250-acre licensed bobwhite quail reserve within converted mixed pine-hardwood and open fields. "Three years ago we started visiting state licensed quail preserves and began seriously discussing establishing one here," Mike said. They began carefully developing a quail management strategy to improve and enhance existing landscape.

Bobwhite quail feed primarily on seeds, fruits, insects, and small amounts of green matter. They thrive best where approximately equal amounts of cultivated crops, idle fields out of cultivation from three to ten years, and forestland are found in small, well-scattered fields. To create the optimum environment, the Strongs began by improving cover for the small birds. Thickets, briar patches, and field edges are maintained by mowing, disking, and prescribed burning. Twenty acres of pastureland in the quail reserve allow open areas for fertilized native plants including honeysuckle. Choice planted foods include Egyptian wheat and par-

Native plants and trees are cultivated to produce generous mast for all types of wildlife: (clockwise: American beautyberry, common persimmon, and Black Tupelo berries.



A salvaged southern pine beetle spot creates a nice edge effect in this pine plantation.

tridge peas. Alternate disking of natural or planted openings each year maintains forbs and legumes.

Three properly located and well constructed lakes provide the Strong family with excellent recreational activities such as fishing and wildlife viewing. Mike and Cathy's home and guesthouse are scenically located on the largest lake, which is managed for largemouth bass and bluegill. Their goal is not to grow trophy bass but simply to make fishing enjoyable. To accomplish this, they work closely with aquatic specialists to maintain a healthy fish population through proper stocking levels and sufficient nutritious foods. To promote the food chain of bass feeding on bluegill, 300 pounds per acre per year of bass under 16 inches are harvested. Threadfin shad and supplemental feeders help feed bluegill from October through April.

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Photo by Tilda Mims

Mike, Cathy, and McDonald Strong on the porch of The Liars' Den, one of several restored log structures on the property.

A one-acre pond stocked only with catfish is also provided with supplemental feeders. Both lakes are fertilized and limed according to pH levels. Adjacent to the fifteen-acre lake is a wetland area for waterfowl management. A water control structure allows water to be released at a desired time, rate, and duration.

A useful and attractive road and bridge system around Yellowleaf Farm provides access for harvesting timber, monitoring

the growth and health of the forest, exercising, recreation, education, and observing nature. Their creative use of recycled flatbeds from trucks and trailers, surplus utility poles, and materials found around the farm was included in a recent issue of this magazine as examples of low-cost permanent bridges.

For two decades, Yellowleaf Farm has hosted friends, family, church groups, and scout troops for days and weekends of recreation and fellowship. In recent years,

Mike and Cathy have opened their gates for well-attended landowner tours that featured wildlife and forest enhancement, cabin restoration, the quail preserve, and low-cost bridge construction options.

"Being TREASURE Forest landowners creates within us a sense of pride and accomplishment," Mike said. The family was working toward multiple-use forest management from the beginning and saw the program as an opportunity. "It gives us access to information. It has been such a great program for us that we have recommended it to others. It is one of the best programs I have ever been involved in."

Future plans for Yellowleaf Farm are as simple as its beginning - to continue to enjoy it, to live there and share it, and try to learn something new about it every day. Mike says he and Cathy never wake up a day on the farm that they are not grateful to be there. "We talk about it every day - how fortunate we are," he said.

Although John Paul and McDonald now have busy careers, they remain involved in the management decisions on the farm, sharing the work and recreation with their parents just as they did many years ago. The bond formed of love and respect for Alabama's natural resources seems destined to carry the family farm into many future generations. 🌲



Photo by Tilda Mims

Several johnny houses provide brooding shelter for quail released into the licensed preserve.



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